PRIVATE CLIENT ADVISORY

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The Dubai
Off-Plan Buyer’s Guide

How overseas investors buy off-plan property in Dubai
— the process, the real costs, and the mistakes to avoid.

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INTRODUCTION

Why this guide exists

Dubai launched over AED 275 billion in new projects in the first half of 2026 alone. Most of it is noise. The difference between a purchase that compounds and one that stalls is made before you ever sign — in the underwriting, the developer, and the contract. This guide is the process I run for private clients, condensed to the parts that decide outcomes.

It is written for serious buyers — investors, entrepreneurs, family offices and relocators deploying AED 2M or more. It assumes you already understand what off-plan is. What follows is how to do it well.

OWNERSHIP

Who can buy, and where

Any nationality can buy in Dubai’s designated freehold zones — which now cover effectively every area an international investor would consider: Palm Jumeirah, Palm Jebel Ali, Downtown, Business Bay, Dubai Marina, Emaar Beachfront, MBR City, Dubai Hills Estate, Dubailand, Dubai South and DIFC. Ownership is full freehold title in your name or a company’s, inheritable and sellable without restriction.

You do not need a residence visa, a local partner, or a UAE bank account to buy. A passport is the core document; expect standard source-of-funds checks at booking, which is compliance, not an obstacle.

THE PROCESS

The seven steps, in order

01 **Underwrite before you shortlist.** Developer delivery record, contract structure, realistic rent, service-charge expectations, exit routes. This step decides the outcome; everything after it is paperwork.

02 **Expression of Interest (EOI).** For sought-after launches you place a refundable deposit — typically AED 50,000 into the low hundreds of thousands — to secure an allocation before units release.

03 **Booking.** On launch day you select the unit and sign a booking form with the down payment, usually 5–20% of price depending on the developer and plan.

04 **Sale & Purchase Agreement (SPA).** Issued within a few weeks. It governs everything: payment schedule, handover date, delay provisions, assignment rights. Read it — or have someone who has read hundreds of them read it.

05 **Oqood registration.** The purchase is registered with the Dubai Land Department’s interim register. The 4% DLD fee is payable here. This registration is your legal protection — never skip or defer it.

06 **Milestone payments into escrow.** Instalments follow the SPA schedule, paid into the project’s RERA-supervised escrow account — not to the developer directly.

07 **Handover & title deed.** At completion you snag the unit, settle the final instalment, and the Oqood converts to a full title deed in your name.

THE NUMBERS

What it actually costs

Cost	Amount	When
DLD registration fee	4% of purchase price	At Oqood registration
Oqood / admin charges	Modest fixed fees	At registration
Down payment	5–20% of price	At booking
Instalments	Per SPA (40/60, 60/40, 80/20)	Through construction
Service charges	Per sqft, annually	From handover
Agency fee (off-plan)	Typically developer-paid	—

What is absent matters as much as what is present. Under current rules Dubai has no annual property tax, no capital gains tax, and no personal income tax on rental income for individual owners. The one-time 4% DLD fee is, in practice, the entire recurring-free government cost of ownership.

PROTECTION

How your money is protected

Every legitimate off-plan project operates a RERA-supervised escrow account. Your instalments go into that account, and the developer can only draw funds against certified construction progress. If a project stalls, the money is not sitting in the developer's operating account. This framework — introduced after the 2008 cycle — is the single biggest structural difference between Dubai off-plan today and its reputation fifteen years ago.

The protection is real but not absolute: it guards capital against diversion, not against delay. Which is why developer selection remains the core underwriting decision.

STRUCTURE

Payment plans, decoded

The plan is not a discount — it is the financing. Off-plan mortgage lending is capped at 50% loan-to-value and rarely available before completion, so the developer plan replaces leverage for most buyers. Read the ratio as capital timing:

40/60, 60/40 — the first number is paid through construction, the balance at handover. Lower first number means less capital at risk before delivery.

80/20 — heavier during construction, lighter at handover. Common on villa and prime product.

Post-handover plans — a slice of the price spread over months or years after you take the keys, easing the cash curve and often improving early cash-on-cash returns.

RESIDENCY

The Golden Visa angle

Property registered at AED 2 million or more qualifies you for the 10-year UAE Golden Visa — and off-plan counts, before handover, based on the DLD-registered value. It is renewable for as long as you hold the asset, covers spouse and children, and has no minimum-stay requirement, which is the feature that matters most to overseas owners.

Structure it from day one. An AED 2.1M unit clears the bar; an AED 1.95M unit does not. Mortgaged and jointly owned purchases can qualify with the right paperwork. The stall points — value fractionally under threshold, missing lender letters, unattested marriage certificates — are all avoidable at purchase and difficult to fix after.

RISK

Where deals go wrong

Buying the render, not the contract. Handover dates, delay clauses and assignment rights live in the SPA. Most buyers never read them.

Ignoring service charges. A spectacular amenity deck is a recurring annual cost. High charges quietly erode net yield.

Choosing tier-3 developers on price alone. The discount exists for a reason. Delivery risk compounds every other risk.

No exit thesis. If you cannot articulate who buys this unit from you and why, you are speculating, not investing.

Work with an advisor, not a portal

Portals list. They do not screen the developer's balance sheet, read the contract, or tell you when not to buy. I work with a small number of private clients at a time, deliberately — because serious advisory takes time. If you are planning a Dubai purchase of AED 2M or more, the conversation starts with your goals, not a brochure.

Request private access mattkarevan.com/private-access